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SUBJECT: TURKISH OPINION MAKERS ON PM ERDOGAN AND THE
PRESIDENCY

REF: A. ANKARA 0648

[1](#)B. ANKARA 0629

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: In what was meant to be an hour and a half tour d'horizon with three of Turkey's most prominent opinion makers, Ambassador was only able to get one question in: Will PM Erdogan be a candidate for President? The heated debate that ensued was a sharp contrast to the backdrop of ships calmly flowing through the Bosphorus. Sahin Alpay of Islamist-oriented daily Zaman believed PM Erdogan would not run. Radikal's editor-in-chief Ismet Berkan proffered that the PM had not yet decided and would likely keep his options open until the very last minute. Leftist-nationalist daily Cumhuriyet's colorful commentator Emre Kongar confidently proclaimed there was no doubt PM Erdogan would be a candidate. The three opinions accurately reflect the diversity of (and passion behind) the discussions throughout Turkey in the weeks ahead of the official start of the presidential election period on April 16. Meanwhile, among industrialist circles, light-hearted bets have proliferated on this subject, suggesting they are not terribly concerned one way or the other, as long as the economy continues to grow. End summary.

SAHIN ALPAY, ZAMAN: NO

[1](#)2. (SBU) Alpay responded first by stating he did not believe PM Erdogan would run for president. He came to this conclusion after "reading something in the papers" about Erdogan's intentions to confer about this decision with the National Security Council (MGK), he said. Responding to Kongar's allegations that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has an ulterior Islamic agenda (see below and ref A), Alpay argued the PM's party has genuinely embraced a western-orientation because it has become convinced that an open market economy protects it from "forces in Ankara."

ISMET BERKAN, RADIKAL: MAYBE

[1](#)3. (SBU) Berkan opined the PM does not yet know what he will do and will likely not make a decision until the last minute. He attributed this to what he described as PM Erdogan's reliance on the Islamic tradition of counseling. He noted the PM had already asked prominent businessmen in Istanbul about their opinions and would seek to hear from other circles as well before announcing his decision. Berkan added that PM Erdogan is "authoritarian" and that once he says something publicly he does not consider alternatives. In a

solo game of devil's advocate, Berkan suggested the very political PM may not seek the apolitical position of the Presidency. However, PM Erdogan may not want to let slip what could be his only opportunity to ascend to the Presidency -- what he called the "forgotten raison-d'etre" of the PM's AKP.

EMRE KONGAR, CUMHURRIYET: YES

¶4. (SBU) The most assertive of the group, Kongar told Ambassador there was no question the PM will pursue the Presidency. He claimed AKP parliamentary group members had recently signaled their voting intentions by giving PM Erdogan their "loyalty, loyalty, loyalty" for his birthday. Characterizing PM Erdogan as the "imam" of the AKP core, Kongar distinguished between AKP and the Republican People's Party (CHP), claiming the PM draws his loyalty from Islamic culture while the loyalty given to CHP leader Deniz Baykal is politically engineered.

¶5. (SBU) Kongar further proffered that AKP's ultimate goal was to change Turkish society in accordance with Islamic principles. It is the only way to explain the party's significant shift from being the most anti-U.S./EU party to the most pro-U.S./EU party, he said. For its part, the party's core electorate has not shifted quite so rapidly with xenophobic anti-American sentiments still riding high. The end justifies the means, explained Kongar. PM Erdogan will seek the Presidency in order to gain influence over the three areas of the State system that he can't control as Prime Minister: the universities, the high courts and the military.

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¶6. (SBU) Refuting Berkan's suggestion that the PM was seeking counsel before making his decision, Kongar argued PM Erdogan wants to shape public opinion rather than sense it. He pointed to the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) recent public statement supporting the ruling party's right to select the President as evidence that the PM's strategy was working.

WHAT TO CONCLUDE?

¶7. (SBU) Despite their differences, the three commentators agreed with Ambassador's conclusion that they all believed the important period is not the month between the start and end of the election but rather the year that follows. Though skeptical, Kongar remained hopeful that if PM Erdogan could be "secular enough" there would be no problems. He feared however, that if AKP were to change "the axis of society" from secular to religious then signs of turmoil would begin on university campuses. Berkan argued that because AKP will control the election, who ultimately becomes President is irrelevant. Rather, he is concerned about the increasing polarization of Turkey which he said threatens its democracy. Alpay disagreed, responding that Turkey has never had a stronger democracy and that polarization was much worse in the 1960s and 70s. He remained "cautiously optimistic" and was less concerned about domestic challenges than those emanating from Iraq "because of the US invasion."

MEANWHILE in the Private Sector...

¶8. (SBU) Among Istanbul's wealthy industrialist class, Erdogan's Presidency - which they consider to be a foregone conclusion should he choose to pursue it - has become a matter for light hearted betting. At one event we attended, a member of one of Turkey's top holding companies bet his

former business partner five thousand dollars that Erdogan would pursue and gain the presidency; a signed document was witnessed by the sister of another leading industrialist (herself one of Turkey's wealthiest women) and given to a third party for safe keeping amidst great laughter. Several board members of TUSIAD, Turkey's pre-eminent association of industrialists and developers, told us that they have bet shopping sprees, trips to London and Geneva, and other "in kind" prizes on the outcome of the election. The nominal head of Turkey's leading holding company told us he did not anticipate a change in fiscal policy, no matter who won the presidency, and that was what mattered.

19. (SBU) Comment: However acute the debate on Turkey's presidency is among thoughtful intellectuals across the political spectrum, however, for the business sector a stable economic environment is the key factor (and presumably the retention of fiscal conservative and businessman Ali Babacan as the AK Parti's key advisor). The picture is unlikely to get clearer before the start of the presidential election process on April 16 and perhaps not until April 25 when all candidates must be officially declared (ref B). End comment.
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